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ABSTRACT

In developing critical reading, humor may contribute to three broad categories of skills: discerning the author's purpose, inferencing, and evaluating content. Passages from children's books such as "Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing" or "The Great Brain" can help to illustrate the need for teachers and students to thoughtfully infer and evaluate the author's mood and purpose. Word play and verbal nonsense provide excellent opportunities for teaching inferencing as students interpret or intelligently guess at the author's meaning. Although basal reading workbooks include word study activities, students may better remember and use the vocabulary taught if the teacher asks a riddle during a two-minute lull before recess or lunch. Inferencing skills can be learned as students clarify contextual meanings of ambiguous statements, mispronunciations, and boners that may be found in newspaper headlines, texts, and conversations. Guided word play, requiring inferences as students categorize precise, applicable definitions according to context, is another appropriate introduction to critical reading. Teachers should include the judicial use of humor in the classroom for its potentially positive effects of brightening the environment, motivating students, and developing reactive, thinking readers. (HOD)

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Pickles Will Kill You: Use Humor to Teach Critical Reading Abilities

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Summary Statement:

In developing critical readers, humor may contribute to three broad categories of skills: descerning the author's purpose, inferencing, and evaluating content. Teachers should include the judical use of humor in the classroom for its potential positive effects of brightening the environment, motivating students, and developing reactive, thinking readers.

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Pickles

"PICKLES WILL KILL YOU! Every pickle you eat brings you nearer to death. Amazingly the 'thinking man' has failed to grasp the terrifying significance of the term 'in a pickle.' Pickles are associated with all major diseases of the body. Eating them breeds wars and communism. They can be related to most airline tragedies. There exists a positive relationship between crime waves and consumption of this fruit of the cucurbit family. For example . . . .

--- Nearly all sick people have eaten pickles. The effects are obviously cumulative.
--- 99.9% of all people who die from cancer have eaten pickles.
--- 100% of all soldiers have eaten pickles.
--- 96.8% of all Communist sympathizers have eaten pickles.
--- 99.7% of the people involved in air and auto accidents ate pickles within 14 days preceding the accident.
--- 93.1% of juvenile delinquents come from homes where pickles are served frequently.

Evidence points to the long-term effects of pickle-eating:

--- Of the people born in 1839 who later dined on pickles, there has been a 100% mortality.
--- All pickle eaters born between 1849 and 1859 have

wrinkled skin, have lost most of their teeth, have brittle bones and failing eyesight if the ills of eating pickles have not already caused their death.

--- Even more convincing is the report of a noted team of medical specialists: rats force-fed with 2 pounds of pickles per day for 30 days developed bulging abdomens. Their appetites for WHOLESOME FOOD were destroyed.

--Anonymous

Humor is a very important characteristic of American culture and an extremely useful social tool. The ability to laugh at one's self is essential for good mental health. A psychologist on a radio talk show recently commented that a sense of humor may mean the difference between life and death. Although people who foolishly try to laugh away serious problems or illnesses may die laughing, a sense of humor is related to the will to live, which is one of the most significant healing factors in critical illnesses.

Donald Durrell (1965) suggests that humor should be included in the reading program because of its motivational value and capability of providing balance, encouraging cooperation, relieving dullness, and encouraging discussion. While there is nothing more

stimulating in or outside the classroom than a good laugh, teachers may ask, do humorous materials contain potential teaching value? Can teachers capitalize on humor to teach critical thinking and reading abilities? Although we stress that reading is for enjoyment and fun as well as for serious instruction, teachers are so pressured by accountability and preoccupied with skill mastery that the values of humor and play are often overlooked. In fact, laughter and mirth are more apparent in hallways, gymnasiums, playgrounds, restrooms, and cafeterias than in the classroom where students are expected to get down to the serious task of learning (Gentile and McMillen, 1978). Yet, because the interpretation of humor requires insight and thinking skills, humor may be used as a tool for teaching critical reading when integrated into the curriculum at all levels from preschool through college.

The National Assessment of Education Progress, the government's testing agency, revealed that present education methods are not producing critical readers. Although nine year-old children throughout the nation are reading better than they did ten years ago, older students are experiencing difficulty in thinking about what they have read. The NAEP reported a ten percent decline from 1970 to 1981 in the ability of seventeen

year-olds to answer inference questions and to explain their interpretations. Furthermore, the report found little evidence of critical reading. In an analysis of these findings a panel of reading experts noted that young readers' tasks concentrated on sounding out words in simple straightforward materials while older readers were required to use higher order thinking skills (Lehr, 1982). Stauffer (1971) noted that training in critical reading should begin in preschool in order to balance the word learning maze of beginning reading instruction, isolated skills and round robin reading. If we expect children to read beyond the literal level, reading must be taught as a thinking process in accordance with the child's cognitive development and experiential background throughout the entire school experience.

Critical reading has been defined as "getting the facts and interpreting deeper meanings as the reader evaluates and passes judgment upon the purpose, the fair-mindedness, the bias, and truthfulness of statements made in the text" (Smith, 1971). In addition to getting the facts or reading what is on the lines, critical reading requires that the reader determine the author's purpose, inference or read between the lines, and evaluate or read beyond the lines of print. May (1982) observed that inferential thinking requires

intelligent guessing while critical thinking demands intelligent judging.

In developing critical reading, humor may contribute to these three broad categories of skills: discerning the author's purpose, inferencing, and evaluating content.

The following editorial excerpt is an example of a passage which must be read critically if the reader is to discern the author's mood and purpose.

> It was a crisp and spicy morning in early October. The lilacs and laburnums, lit with the glory fires of autumn, hung burning and flashing in the upper air; a fairy bridge provided by kind Nature for the wringless wild things, that have their homes in the tree-tops and would visit together; the larch and pomegranate flung their purple and yellow flames in brilliant broad splashes along the slanting sweep of the woodland; the sensous frangrance of innumerable deciduous flowers rose upon the swooning atmosphere; far in the empty sky a solitary esophagus slept upon motionless wing; everywhere brooded stillness, serenity, and the peace of

God. (Mark Twain, 1917)

What pictures were mirrored in your mind as you read this passage? Most people in Mark Twain's day visualized a serene and beautiful fall day in which peace and the beauty of nature overflowed. However, one man, a critically reading professor from the Phillipines, wrote to Clemens who was also the editor, saying that he was puzzled about the meaning of one word for which he had not found an appropriate meaning in his dictionary. The reader asked for a definition of the word, "esophagus", Mark Twain admitted it was a joke and added that while he had an esophagus, "it never sleeps in the air or anywhere else." He then advised the professor to reread the paragraph critically for not only was the word "esophagus" nonsense, but the entire passage was devoid of meaning. When graduate reading students at the University of Southern Colorado were asked to read the passage without a purpose, they, like the readers at the turn of the century, failed to see the absurdity of the paragraph which Mark Twain had intentionally constructed to deceive the non-critical reader. Thoughtful reading would cause one to question "lilacs lit with glory fires of autumn", "wingless wild things living in tree tops," and "purple and yellow pine trees."

Teachers need to become alert to clues which state or

imply the author's purpose, mood, and style of writing. Look for such clues as you read a passage describing an imaginary educational research study on learning modalities to determine whether the sapiditory or taste modality will improve reading instruction when used alone or in combination with auditory, visual, and kinesthetic modalities. The following describes the special packaging of Alpha-bits cereal to be used in the study:

> With the aid of the computer we were able to control not only the letters within each package, but the order in which the letters were packaged. ...We were able to ligature the individual letters to spell words. The rest was relatively simple with the computer. For our initial experiment we used the Dolch Basic Word List. The results were so promising in teaching a group of dyslexic children by sapiditory reinforcement that we were able to secure the cooperation of the C.W. Post Compoany in packaging Alpha-bits into boxes of words at fourteen different reading levels (McCracken, 1974).

Children in the experimental group were required to eat the words in thirty minute periods while control group children were to read library books. If a child

finished a level one box, he was promoted to a level two box and so on. McCracken stated in his conclusions that teachers should consult the physicians of overweight children before allowing them to participate in the study. Furthermore, he called teachers who used this method "saps", a shortened form of the word, sapiditory. Nevertheless, when Baldwing and Readence (1979) asked graduate students from two universities to read the entire McCracken article in which such absurdities were interwoven, the student failed to recognize the study as satire on educational research and learning modalities.

Although the passages cited above illustrate the need for teachers and older students to thoughtfully infer and evaluate the author's mood and purpose, teachers of elementary students should to read and discuss passages from children's books such as Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing by Judy Blume, The Great Brain by John D. Fitzgerald, and How to Eat Fried Worms by Thomas Rockwell followed by discussions of mood and purpose. Different points of view are exemplified in Mary Stolz' A Dog on Barkham Street and The Bully of Barkham Street which describe the same characters and events from different points of view. Sports events reported by opposing teams, comics, advertisements, and editorials also teach readers to become aware of the author's point

of view, mood, and purpose. However, if teachers are to efffectively model critical reading abilities for students, it is imperative that they first develop their own competencies as critical readers.

Inferencing through humorous word play

Word play and verbal nonsense provide excellent opportunities for teaching inference as students interpret or intelligently guess at the author's meaning. Playful experimentation with language is a pleasant strategy for introducing critical reading to even the youngest children as they increase their vocabularies while forming new concepts and broadening old ones. Word play offers children much experience in categorizing as they discern likenesses and differences, compare and contrast meanings, and evaluate that which is appropriate and inappropriate to the situation. Activities involving multiple meaning words, homonyms, homophones, puns, riddles, mispronounciations, boners, ambiguities, sound variations, and figures of speech help children to view print from many angles rather than to unquestioningly accept all printed matter with undue reverence. Most English words have more than one meaning. For example: "Police police police picnic." In this sentence the word, "police" is used as a noun, a verb, and an adjective, each having a different connotation. A

dump truck is different from the city dump which is different from a hazardous waste dump. A corn silo bears little meaning to a missile silo. The labor union, credit union, and union of states all have meaning different from grandpa's union suit. A big black bug evokes a mental image quite unlike that of a big black cloud, while the river bank has little in common with banking the fire, or depositing money in the bank.

Although basal reading workbooks include word study activities, students may better remember and use the vocabulary taught as the teacher asks a riddle during that two minute lull before recess or lunch. Q's are Weird O's by Roy Doty is a source of timely, relevant multiple-meaning words, which reflect changes in language. Some examples are: "How can you make money fast? Glue it to the floor", "Who killed Humpty Dumpty? A pusher," and "What relaxes a chess play? To take a knight off'. Tyson and Mountain (1982) suggest the use of riddles as strategies for interpreting figurative expressions such as: "What does a grizzly _____ take on a trip? Only the _____ essentials." An example of a triple honophone pun is that of the nervous bridegroom who rehearsed three things he should do when he reached the church: go up the aisle, to the altar, and join in the singing of the first hymn. The bride

listened to his intentions and then expressed her own intentions by whispering, "I'll alter him."

Inferencing skills are learned as students clarify contextual meanings of ambiguous statements, mispronunciations, and boners which may be found in newspaper headlines, texts, and conversations. Some humorous examples are: She fed her dog biscuits, Flying planes can be dangerous, and Mother is roasting in the kitchen. Pullet Surprises by Amsel Green, a student's boner for Pulitzer Prizes, includes games involving humorous mispronunciations, misuses and misapplications of words. Some of Green's examples are: "Redwoods are noted for their senility," "The ailing king finally went into a comma and died," and "Her difficulties were the result of laps of memory." Other helpful sources for helping students develop inferencing abilities, imagination, and flexibility through word play are: The King Who Rained and A Chocolate Moose for Dinner by Fred Gwynne, Amelia Bedelia series by Peggy Parish, Punidles by Bruce and Brett MacMillan, Dandelions Don't Bite by Leone Adelson, What a Funny thing to Say by Bernice Kohn, and the Abcedarian Book by Charles Furegeson.

Evaluating ideas through humorous writings

Guided word play, requiring inferencing as students

categorize precise, applicable definitions according to context, is an appropriate introduction to critical reading. However, the key word in critical reading is evaluation, a categorization skill, involving many comparisons as readers discriminate real from unreal and fact from fantasy, recognize assumptions, and pass judgment upon the validity ad reliability of the text.

All reading materials should be interesting and meaningful, and because humorous materials often meet these criteria, they may be appropriate for developing critical reading ability. Motivating springboards for evaluating fact from fantasy my be found in humorous poetry collections such as John Ciardi's, The Man Who Sang the Sillies and You Sing to Me and I'll Sing to You, Robert Cole's, Oh How Silly and Beastly Boys and Ghastly Girls, and Shel Silverstein's Where the Sidewalk Ends and A Light in the Attic. Zintz (1984) suggests evaluative questioning of folk songs such as "The ballad of Davy Crockett" as a strategy for distinguishing reality from fictious exaggeration. Students might be asked to question the degree of truth in statements such as: "Born on a mountain top, greenest state in the land of the free, killed him a bear when he was only three, fought single-handed in an Indian war, and patched up the crack in the liberty bell." Other folk songs which

lend themselves to critical questioning include "Old Dan Tucker," "John Henry," and "Big Rock Candy Mountain." Folk tales, tall tales, myths, and fables are also good sources for distinguishing fact from fantasy.

Humorous exercises like those developed by Pearson and Johnson (1978) provide practice in verifying the validity of statements such as: "Benjamin Franklin weighted 217 pounds, Thomas Jefferson weighed 817 pounds, Benjamin Franklin was fatter than Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin was fat." Through analysis of such statements readers learn that facts can be verified, even if false, while opinions cannot. The anonymous report cited at the beginning of this article, "Pickles Will Kill You," is illustrative of material which lends itself to careful examination of false assumptions, half-truths, omitted details, unreliable, unverified information, and mistaken casual relations. Although these skills are overlapping and non-distinct, they are important to foundations of critical reading and, like other higher cognitive abilities, may be developed through the use of humor in the classroom.

Humor motivates, develops insight, expands thinking, and requires reactive critical reading. In the pleasurable, risk-free environments in which learning best

takes place. humor provides opportunities to play with ideas. The use of humorous materials to teach critical reading by determining the author's purpose and inferring and evaluating content is recommended to supplement the higher order questioning of informational materials and other critical reading activities. Include the judicial use of humor in the classroom for its potential positive effects of brightening the environment, motivating students, and developing reactive, thinking readers.

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